

Love lessons

Charlotte Higgins

If you really want to know about dating and relationships, then it's time to read some Latin poetry, says Charlotte Higgins.

The modern world is full of advice on how to find and keep a boyfriend, or girlfriend. A random look at a popular girls' magazine website promises the following dating nuggets: How To Stay Hot For Each Other; Four Ways to Sweep Him Off His Feet; Signs You Are Finally Over Him; Needy Moves You Must Nix.

It's pretty trashy stuff, of course. And – just as they did with straight roads, hot baths, and world domination – the Romans got there first. If you really want to know about dating and relationships, then it's time to read some Latin poetry. Not only will the Romans tell you all you need to know about love and romance; but, naturally, they are an infinitely classier, more enriching read than a lot of dumb mags.

Turning love into poetry

The Romans, in fact, were the first people to write about love in terms of a complete relationship – the whole journey, from the first moments of desire to the loved-up joy of requited love to the agony of rejection. It was Catullus (born in 84 B.C.) who really invented the notion of writing a relationship through, as it were. He charts his affair with Lesbia (probably a pseudonym for an aristocratic, married woman called Clodia), unblinkingly turning his poetic attention on to his own turbulent, often paradoxical emotions – which still seem utterly real and fresh now, as if he had been writing only yesterday. After that everyone wrote about love. Propertius (born around 54 B.C.) wrote about his beloved Cynthia – in even more obsessive, tortured, self-examining detail. Horace (born in 65 B.C.) wrote some wonderful love poems in a rather more detached, ironical vein. Virgil, born in 70 B.C., brought love into epic, writing beautifully about love in his account of the doomed affair between Dido and Aeneas. And then there was Ovid (born in 43 B.C.), who, characteristically, took the mickey: his love poems called the *Amores* (Loves) turn the seriousness and self-examination of Catullus and Propertius into mischievous, witty, sexy fun.

Ovid even wrote two long poems that we might now class as self-help books: the *Ars Amatoria* (Art of Love) and the

Remedia Amoris (Cures for Love). These are humorous takes on the ancient genre of didactic poems – poems meant to teach you something. Usually the subjects of didactic poetry were terribly serious – the most famous is Hesiod's *Works and Days*, composed around 700 B.C., which was all about farming; then there is Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of the Universe) which taught you how to live your life in accordance with the teachings of the Epicurean philosophical school (we'll come back to him, since he had some interesting things to say about love, as it happens). Ovid's didactic poems, however, were cheeky and tongue in cheek – they were all about how to find a boyfriend or girlfriend; and then, when the time was right, how to cure yourself of love. We know that apart from didactic poetry, he drew on a particularly unelevated genre of writing as inspiration – the sex manual. (Yes, the ancient Greeks invented the sex manual. There's a lot your teachers don't tell you. Alas, only one or two tiny fragments survive.)

So, to business: here are some lessons in love from the Romans.

Lesson one: don't hang about

Here's one of Horace's most famous poems, quoted endlessly for its famous phrase *carpe diem*, 'seize the day'.

Don't play with horoscopes, Leuconoë, don't ask what end the gods have in store for me or for yourself. They don't want us to know. Far better to endure whatever comes, whether Jupiter gives us more winters or whether this is our last now exhausting the Mediterranean on the pumice rocks that block its waves. Be sensible, strain the wine, and cut back your long hopes to a short term. As we speak, miserly time has flashed past. Harvest the day and leave as little as you can for tomorrow.

Odes 1. 11. Trans. David West

The set-up is this. Horace's girlfriend Leuconoë is anxiously reading a horoscope to see what's in store for her and Horace. No point, says Horace. We can't

see what's coming. We only know we have today. So why are we wasting time? Let's go to bed. And while you're at it, love, pour us a drink. *Carpe diem*, harvest (or seize) the day, means, in this context, 'let's get down to it'. *Carpe* is the word often used for 'plucking' flowers. 'Plucking flowers' in the ancient world was very often a metaphor for taking virginity. Not that I am suggesting you actually follow this advice... it's the spirit of the thing that's important: don't hang about.

Lesson two: get a makeover

Think Trinny and Susannah. You're not going to pull if you look a sight, says Ovid. Here's one for you, boys:

*Keep your nails pared, and dirt-free;
Don't let those long hairs sprout
In your nostrils, make sure your
breath is never offensive,
Avoid that rank male stench
That wrinkles noses. Beyond this
is for wanton women –
Or any half-men who want to
attract men.*

Ars Amatoria 1.519–24. Trans. Peter Green

Let's draw a veil over his little dig at boys who prefer boys. What he's going for is an approach that takes a sensible middle path between unwashed he-man and the wilder shores of David Beckham-style metrosexuality. In the passage immediately preceding this one, he warns against going over the top with the boy beauty regimen: 'don't think it's a good idea to style your hair with curling irons, or depilate your legs with stinging pumice'. Ovid, it seems clear, wouldn't approve of the full back, sack, and crack depilation. His perfectly cogent advice is that a fellow who wants to attract the ladies should have high standards of personal hygiene, be turned out stylishly, and (I think we can all raise a glass to this) definitely come minus nasal hair.

Lesson three: enjoy being loved up

*My Lesbia, let us live and love
And not care tuppence for old men
Who sermonise and disapprove.
Suns when they sink can rise
again,
But we, when our brief light has*

shone,
Must sleep the long night on and on.
Kiss me: a thousand kisses, then
A hundred more, and now a second
Thousands and hundred, and now still
Hundreds and thousands more, until
The thousand thousands can't be reckoned
And we've lost track of the amount
And nobody can work us ill
With the evil eye by keeping count.

Catullus 5. Trans. James Michie

This is one of Catullus' most joyful poems. It's rather similar to Horace's *carpe diem* poem in spirit: enjoy love, don't waste time, we're alive for such a little while, he's saying. It really doesn't need much explanation...

Lesson four: be lovable

Boys, another one for you. If you want to hang on to a girl, treat her nicely. Put some effort into being attentive to her. Laugh at her jokes. Flatter her. Show her that you're just fascinated by everything she has to say. If you're playing Scrabble with her, be sure she wins.

*Censure the things she censures,
Endorse her endorsements, echo her every word,
Pro or con, and laugh whenever she laughs; remember,
If she weeps, to weep too: take your cue
From her every expression. Suppose she's playing a
board-game,
Then throw the dice carelessly, move
Your pieces all wrong. At knucklebones, when you beat
her,
Exact no forfeit, roll low throws yourself
As often as you can manage. If you're playing halma,
permit her
Glass piece to take yours. Open up
Her parasol, hold it over her when she's out walking,
Clear her a path through the crowd.
When she's on her chaise-longue, make haste to find a
footstool
For those dainty feet of hers, help her on and off
With her slippers. At times she'll feel cold: then (though
you're shivering
Yourself) warm her tiny hand
In your bosom.*

Ars Amatoria 2.199–204; 209–14. Trans. Peter Green

(By the way, the next time a man finds me a footstool while I am lying on my chaise-longue I will be lobbying to create a national holiday in celebration.)

Lesson five: dump nicely

Virgil's *Aeneid* book four tells the story of how Aeneas, the Trojan prince, comes to Carthage and falls in love with the queen there, Dido. But the relationship isn't to be. Aeneas is fated to go to Italy to found the Roman people. The god Mercury is dispatched to Carthage to chivvy Aeneas along and to tell him to set sail. So far, so reasonable. The only problem is that Aeneas completely messes up.

Having been warned off the relationship, he decides to consult his male friends (yawn) instead of talking to Dido right away. He starts packing up his things and making ready for the voyage. But Dido finds out what's going on through the grapevine – and she's understandably furious. Things come to a head. She confronts him; he gives her a totally inadequate answer, saying that if he'd had his own way, he'd never have left Troy in the first place. Tactless! Dido really kicks off now, and now Aeneas is even more unable to give her a reasonable answer.

*But dutiful Aeneas, though he desired to ease her sadness
by comforting her and to turn aside pain with words, still,
with much sighing, and a heart shaken by the strength of
her love,
followed the divine command, and returned to the fleet.
Then the Trojans truly set to work and launched the tall
ships
all along the shore.*

Aeneid 4.393ff. Trans. Tony Kline

With what some might call typical male inarticulacy, Aeneas fails to comfort Dido even though he loves her. It's a bad mistake. Dido curses him and all his descendants, before committing suicide. The peoples of Carthage and Rome are now fated to be locked in endless enmity. The curse is (supposedly) responsible for the real Punic wars between Carthage and Rome, which went on for almost a century, ending in 146 B.C.

Cures for love

Mercifully, the Latin love poets also had lots of practical advice on getting over a bad break-up. Lucretius suggests you keep as detached as possible (this is also an excellent preventative measure). A key tenet of Epicureanism was *ataraxia*, a Greek word meaning freedom from turmoil. For the Epicurean, pleasure is important, but it needs to be manageable. The kind of hectic, unreliable pleasure we get from romantic love, which can all too easily turn into pain and misery, is out. So the idea is to steer clear of falling in love altogether.

Take my advice and keep your fancy free.

For to avoid being captured in the snares of love

Is not so difficult as to escape

Once in, and break the powerful knots of Venus.

De Rerum Natura 4.1146–8. Trans. Ronald Melville

Propertius suggests keeping yourself busy. Perhaps take a holiday to Greece?

I must away on the great journey to learned Athens

To rid myself by travel of love's burden.

...The only cure will be foreign travel. Then love

Will go as far from mind as Cynthia from sight.

Propertius 3.21.1–2; 8–10. Trans. Guy Lee

As for Ovid, his advice is to steer clear of romantic reminders, and that includes love poetry. No mooning around in the bedroom listening to gloomy music, reading Catullus or Propertius...

What's more, though I hate to say it,

Love-poems are out: the ban extends to my own

Collected works..

Remedia Amoris 757–9. Trans. Peter Green

Oops – he just banned his own poems.

Charlotte Higgins is the Arts Correspondent of the Guardian and the author of Latin Love Lessons: Put A Little Ovid In Your Life (Short Books). Her second book, It's All Greek To Me (Short Books), is about to hit the bookshops.